

Trouble by John Lucas

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What happened was this . . .

To begin with it just looked like a really busy afternoon. But as Carl's eyes started to take it in, he could see it had been twisted, cranked up. On Mare Street they weren't shopping. JD Sports had been broken into and people surged inside, ran out cradling trainers and tracksuits. A chant went up around the watchers: 'JD . . . JD . . . JD.' Traffic was gridlocked, the sounding horns pointless, and the air was thick with sirens and the whirring rotor blades of helicopters hovering low above. Crowds filled the pavement and the street - some getting trouble, some wanting trouble, some just watching everyone else, drinking in the spectacle, filming it with phones high above their heads. Further up the road under the railway bridge, a zigzag of police cars was parked across the street, one smashed up. A line of riot police were stood there. They weren't moving, seemed content to leave everyone to it, only responding when anyone came too close, to goad them or throw missiles. They were letting people break what they wanted, steal what they wanted, do what they wanted. Even the buses stuck in traffic were set upon, their windows broken. A van had its back forced open and crates and planks of wood were being taken out, carried off.

Carl looked up at the helicopters, three of them there; their steady sound only adding to the unreal atmosphere, feeding it, recycling it; sending it back down hotter and denser. A group of kids came through on bikes; Carl thought he recognized them. But then they all looked the same, hoods up, faces covered. One mass, one energy.

Carl watched them go and a voice rang out clear in his head: There's catching up to do. He followed them up the street, past the bystanders, the rubbernecks. Carl wasn't interested in watching from the sidelines, not any more. He wanted a piece of it. He wanted to take a piece of it. He'd tried playing the game; he'd tried following the rules. The rules didn't work. Just look around: the rules definitely didn't work.

Up ahead a kid picked up a metal bin that had found its way into the middle of the street. He carried it over to the pavement, raised it high and, speeding up, slammed it into a shop window. A cheer went up, whistles. Another followed, this time with a shopping trolley. Others came with planks of wood, chairs, whatever they could get their hands on. They were carrying the fight, spreading the fight. They took it in turns, hitting the same spot on the window, and it started to weaken, the glass patterned like a web.

Carl saw a thin metal pole in the gutter, tight up against the kerb. He picked it up, and for a second he questioned himself. But there was no confusion. His head was clear, pinpointed. Something had to give, that was all; something was giving. Something had to be done. This was doing, this was now. There wasn't any now in the life he'd been living. He'd grown to realize there wasn't even a later. With cheers at his back he joined the assault on the window, swinging the pole hard.

A kid, his hood up, red bandana covering his face, joined Carl, holding a bike frame high - no wheels, no seat - and hit the window with it, same place. 'Yes, mate!' he shouted.

'That yours?' said Carl.

'Yeah,' he laughed. 'It is now, innit?'

Carl and the kid took it in turns, hitting the window again and again. Carl was catching up. He could feel it. Nearly two year's worth.

Once the window had gone, the kid dumped the bike frame on the ground and reached in to get what he could. Others joined him, but Carl moved on. He followed the road up. All around, shop windows were getting smashed. Bins were dragged into the middle of the road and set alight.

The riot police began to mobilize, coming forward in a steady blue line. People picked up bottles scattered across the street from upturned bins. They ran towards the police and hurled the bottles at them, the air ringing with breaking glass. The ones that hit were swatted away, but it kept them slow. Others arrived with fireworks, shooting whining rockets at the advancing line.

Down a side street a car was being set upon, kids attacking it from all sides. Carl was running to join in before he even knew it.

It didn't matter where they were from - what estate, what school, nothing. All that was set aside. It was like a game. It was like a game, but at the same time felt more real than anything ever had before, like this was the way it was always supposed to be, if no one got involved - no authorities, no police, no laws.

A brick went through the car's passenger window. A kid arrived holding a breeze block above his head and smashed it through the windscreen. One young kid, only about eleven or twelve, climbed up on the roof, started jumping up and down on it. With his pole, Carl got to work on the taillights, smashing them with ease. There wasn't much space left around the car, and one older kid, his grey hood pulled tight around his face, just had the driver's door to focus on. He opened it, slammed it shut, opened it, slammed it shut. After a few goes he wasn't making much headway, so he walked off, took a run-up and fly-kicked it instead. He disappeared and came back with a plank of wood that he sent through the driver's window. Carl moved round to the side, swung his pole like a baseball bat into the back door, making deep dents with a satisfying crunch. A flaming bottle was tossed in through the open windscreen and it landed on the driver's seat.

Carl paused to watch the seat begin to burn. He caught sight of himself in the back-door window. He didn't want to look at first, scared of what he'd see. But there he was. His eyes wide, his jaw set, his shoulders set. Standing tall. His heart hit hard inside his chest, beat like it was meant to. At last. His head whirred like rotor blades, thoughts and feelings all churned up. And his reflection saw him; told him the news just by looking: he was back.

What happened was this . . .

'So you wanna . . . just . . . leave?'

'Yeah.'

'Just like that?'

'Yeah.'

'Where you gonna go?'

'I dunno. Nowhere.'

Bells laughed a spluttering laugh and kicked back in his chair. 'You wanna leave and go nowhere?'

'Yeah.' Any other time Carl would've thought that was weak, not enough. But this wasn't any other time. The night before, he'd had a gun pointed at his head, shots were fired, he didn't know how, but they'd missed. It had changed things.

Bells' tone went cold. He stared hard at Carl. 'I can't have people thinking they can just walk away. What do you think this is? Some holiday camp? Some job or hobby or some shit?'

'I know what it is, Bells. I've been doing it long enough.'

'Yeah . . . so you should know what to expect. You should know what you're asking. Take some time. Go away and take some time. I've been shot at myself. I know what it's like. It gets you thinking. Gets you thinking all kinds of shit. It gets you thinking, but that's all it does. It doesn't change anything. The world's still the world. You understand? The estate's still the estate. Hackney's still Hackney.'

'It's not, though, Bells. I saw it. It was different. I was different.'

'What? What did you see?'

Carl looked down at his feet, his trainers nestled deep in Bells' cream-coloured carpet. Up until then he had been rising fast. Rising so fast he was on course for the top, maybe even taking Bells' place one day. Now he'd come to see him, the boss, the big boss, the man who ran things on the estate, to tell him that he was leaving the crew. It wasn't a decision you took lightly; it wasn't a decision you were supposed to take at all. But Carl had changed. That night had changed him in the blink of an eye, the click of a

trigger, and he had found himself somewhere down the dark barrel of a gun.

Carl told Bells what had happened.

'You realize if you ain't with us . . .' said Bells, speaking into the silence that followed. He held up his fist and looked closely at the scar across his knuckles. 'If you ain't with us . . . I ain't gonna say you're against us, but . . . no one's gonna look out for you, you understand?' He paused to pinch the scar between his fingers. 'You get in trouble: you deal with it. You get hurt: that's your business. Ain't no one gonna help. Ain't no one probably even gonna speak to you. You understand? You prepared for that?'

Bells raised his eyes. Carl nodded.

'I'm gonna have to tell people you gone crazy, that you're a liability. That way it looks like we're doing ourselves a favour by getting rid of you. And that means you keep your head down, you lay low. And you stick with what I say. No mistakes.'

'Whatever you say, Bells.'

Bells rocked forward. 'Yeah . . . that's right,' he said. 'It is whatever I say. It's always whatever I say. Remember that. But I'll give you a chance. Take some time. You got a day.'

Carl knew he'd already said too much. Even if he went back the next day and told Bells that he'd reconsidered . . . he'd already broken some faith, some trust. There couldn't be any weakness, any sign of weakness. But the fact was, he didn't want to go back. Bells was in charge out on the estate, but inside . . . inside, Carl had handed over control to someone else, someone who could not be argued with, who would not be denied, a person who would not take no for an answer: himself.

The night before was a sharp night in early November, twenty-one months before those few days in August when the curtain was pulled down, the world caught out, caught napping. That night, Carl had been introduced to the real Carl; the deep-down Carl. The Carl that lived so far inside him that it was barely even a Carl he recognized.

What happened was this . . .

Carl was sixteen then and he loved trouble. Him and trouble had been tight. It was trouble that gave him purpose; that gave him the spring to bounce out of bed in the morning. It was trouble he'd meet at the school gates. Street-level trouble. The kind of trouble you'd bump into coming round a dark corner, or in the shadows of stairwells and alleyways. The kind of trouble that would ring late at night with coded messages and details of covert meetings.

That night trouble called and Carl went out to meet it. But it turned out Carl had been set up. He got jumped from behind - a crack on his jaw and he was down, a gun right in his face, the barrel gaping wide, about to swallow him up, swallow the whole world. The barrel pressed hard against his head, the finger on the trigger, pressing down, pressing down.

'DO YOU WANT TO LIVE?'

'Of course I want to live!' shouted Carl, gasping at the pain in his jaw.

'WHY?'

Why? What kind of a question was that? And how was he supposed to answer? Why? The questions kept on coming and the gun kept on pressing down. Carl felt his life being pulled out of him, wrenched out of him like a roll of film. He watched it play out behind his eyes, in front of his eyes, all around. IMAX and surround-sound. There was no hiding place. He watched the moves he'd always made, the parts he'd always played. He watched the posing, the posturing, the pretending, the acting, the trying to be somebody. It was him, a version of him, but it wasn't him.

It was a cruel trick to play. Here he was, about to die, and he saw - saw with ice-cold clarity - that he had never even lived. Sure, he'd had air in his lungs, blood pumping in his veins, light in his eyes. But he'd never lived.

Lying there, down on the concrete, blood and grit in his mouth, the black steel against his forehead, Carl knew - knew it that second - that if he'd had his time over, he would've been serious. He would've had serious fun; he would've laughed, cried,

run, slept, eaten, breathed, washed, kissed, fought, talked, walked, with a hundred per cent of everything, with a whole world of commitment, with every sinew and fibre and muscle and ounce.

It was too late, though. It was all going to end and he'd learned it too late. The gun fired: BANG-BANG-BANG.

. . . But he was still there . . . he was still there . . . he was still there. He didn't know how, he didn't know why, but he was still there. He'd been given another chance. He ran home. He flew up the steps of his block, slammed his front door and locked himself in the bathroom. Clinging tight to the washbasin, he stared at his reflection, the film on constant repeat behind his eyes.

Carl reinvented himself in the bathroom mirror. He shaved off his hair, he changed his name. He saw a different future. A future without trouble.

Carl went to see Bells as arranged. Taking the time he'd suggested had only made Carl more sure, more determined. Bells made it clear that Carl was cut adrift, that he might as well have been shot and killed. He might carry on living in the same flat, the same block, but as far as the crew was concerned, from then on he wasn't anyone, he wasn't worth anything.

'Anything?' said Carl.

'That's right. You should be prepared to accept anything. In fact, you're lucky if you get anything. There are plenty of people out there who can't even get that.'

'Great,' said Carl. 'Inspirational. Thanks.'

The man behind the desk pushed his glasses up his nose and looked at Carl blankly. 'We're not here to be inspirational. We're here to get you into work. And with your age, your education, I'd advise you to take any work you can get. If you don't want a job that's up to you, but if that's the case, you won't get any benefits.' He smiled a smug, case-closed smile, and joined his hands together.

Carl hadn't said he didn't want a job. That's why he'd come to the job centre: because he did want one. He wanted to tell the man how hard he'd worked to get that education he was sneering at; how close he'd come to not even seeing that age; how tough it had been

to even find his way into the seat opposite him in the first place. But the man wasn't interested. Carl was just a number, a name, a box to tick. The man handed over a mound of forms and paperwork. Carl was dismissed.

It was the end of the following summer; ten months after Carl's gunpoint revelation, his meeting with Bells, and his decision to turn his back on the crew.

The only way he'd got through it was by keeping himself busy. He did his schoolwork, worked out; played football, basketball; joined a boxing club. Avoiding trouble had kept him busy too. It still hung around - in school, on the estate, on the streets. Carl had to leave the flat early when the coast was clear; he had to walk different routes, come home late, check corners, check shadows. But he'd done it. He took his GCSEs in the spring, and considering he crammed five years of school work into five months, he did well.

When he got his results, it seemed the hard work had paid off. He could have stayed on to do his A-levels but he wanted to get out into the world. He wanted that new life, the life he'd seen for himself that November night.

Carl went to the job centre every week. He searched the touch-screen machines, printing off available jobs, taking them to a desk when his name was called, and was shown how to apply. He did his bit, they gave him a form, he signed his name, he went on his way. Applying for jobs became a full-time job in itself. It took whole days to do it. Page after page of personal statements, questionnaires, employment and experience histories (even if you didn't have any), evaluations, critiques, essays, personal statements, questionnaires, employment and experience histories . . . It was like he was going for a job at NASA or MI5, not loading boxes at a warehouse.

'Why do I need to write all this?' Carl asked.

'Because there's a lot of competition. They need to make sure they choose the right candidate.'

'I've got arms and legs. I can carry stuff. Ain't that enough?'

It didn't seem like it was enough, no.

If there was one thing Carl quickly learned about the world, it was that it was built on forms, made of forms, stuck together with forms. Stacks and stacks of them. You needed a form to do this, a form to do that. You needed a form for a form that meant you could fill out a form which gave you access to a form that meant you were registered for another form. The world turned on forms. Forget fire, forget the wheel, forget the computer, it was the form that was clearly the height of human achievement.

When Carl sent off an application for a telesales job, didn't hear anything back, and continued to see it advertised, he began to wonder if the jobs he was going for even existed at all; if it wasn't really some conspiracy, some kind of population control - just keep them filling out the forms, the forms, the forms, the forms, keep them quiet, keep them occupied, keep them out of trouble.

Eventually a couple of Carl's applications did lead to interviews, but the interviews didn't lead to jobs. Too many of the other applicants had the necessary experience. How much experience you needed to work in a fast-food restaurant or behind a deli counter, Carl wasn't sure. But either way, he didn't have it. He didn't have what it took.

It was Christmas when Carl got his first official job. It was a temporary one, stacking shelves overnight in a cavernous supermarket. The other staff members drifted like ghosts along the aisles, nocturnal eyes wide despite the unforgiving strip lights. The only sounds the squeak of trolley wheels, the rip of packaging, and the occasional whispered bad joke, followed by the echo of a desperate laugh. Carl started to think that maybe his mind had tricked him. Maybe he really had died on that November night after all; maybe this was some kind of afterlife, some limbo land he'd been condemned to inhabit in everlasting confusion.

As it turned out, it only lasted a month. The supermarket offered permanent jobs to some of the Christmas staff, but Carl wasn't one of them. He was told he 'didn't have the right attitude to represent the company'. It was the only good thing anyone had said to him the whole time he was there. 'Thanks,' said Carl.

Carl's job seeker's allowance didn't stretch far, and his parents' help only stretched to essentials, so Carl had to give up the gym and the boxing. To keep busy he volunteered at a local community group, the idea being that he'd talk to younger kids about his experiences, about his old life, about how close he'd come to dying, and how it had changed him.

Carl had a story to tell, but his voice was shaky - telling it was different when there was a group of kids staring at you, looking bored, trying not to be interested.

Stephen, a mouthy know-it-all twelve-year-old, put his hand up. 'Why's your life so much better now, then?' he said.

Carl met his eyes. He could tell from the look in them that Stephen was on the edge, on the verge of squeezing trouble for all it was worth.

'Well . . .' he said. He swallowed hard. 'It's just better. I feel better. Inside.'

The kids laughed. Carl looked at Stephen. To begin with he didn't join in with the others - maybe wanted to hear more, wanted to understand - but all too quickly he was laughing along. They didn't want to hear about feelings - they wanted evidence, results. They wanted excitement and action.

On his walk home that evening, Carl realized he hadn't thought it through. He hadn't thought it through because he didn't want to know the answer himself. Of course, it was obvious that risking your life, risking someone else's, risking a life banged up, these were bad. But what was the alternative? What did it look like? Carl was finding it hard to tell. It had all seemed so simple that November night, so clear. But where did it all go now? Where did it fit?

When Carl turned the corner to the stairwell of his block, a big hand hit hard into his chest and pushed him up against the wall. It was Bells. 'What do you think you're doing?' he said, his voice rasping, his face in close.

'What are you talking about, Bells?' Carl's voice was thin; the old bravado rusty.

'Where you been tonight.' It sounded like it should've been a question but it wasn't. 'What was the deal? Can you remember what the deal was?'

Carl's mouth was dry. He couldn't answer.

'No more talking. You understand? No more messing with kids' heads. You understand? What did I tell you about keeping your head down?'

'OK,' said Carl. His breath had gone. Nothing to offer.

'No mistakes, yeah? No talking. No causing trouble. You don't want to leave the estate in a bag.' Bells slipped off into the shadows, every other shadow turning deadly in his place.

Carl didn't go back to the community group. At first it was because of Bells. But soon it felt like it was the whole world. Carl found it hard to even get out of bed in the mornings. It was a fight too big. And if he was up against the whole world, then he'd just avoid the world. He started to spend more and more time at home. He played computer games, gave up whole days to them, whole weekends, whole weeks. It felt like he was giving his life away; it was anti-life, a way of forgetting he even existed. But at least in the games he could be somebody; he could make progress, achieve something, even if that something didn't have a place outside his bedroom. In his bedroom he could be the hero. And his bedroom was better than nothing.

He'd have crazy dreams - dreams where he put on massive parties, taking over the whole block, inviting the whole estate, his old crew, Bells. He'd wake up, his cheeks wet with tears, his heart pounding, like it was trying to take over the job itself, start a coup, a mutiny, break away while Carl was unconscious.

The job centre started hassling. They told him if he didn't start applying for more jobs there'd be trouble - he could lose his benefits. Trouble. The word chimed, it rang out. Trouble: Carl had missed it. Carl missed that spring in his step, that fire in his belly. He missed his friends who still lived their lives with it up close, entwined.

By that summer Carl felt as formless as a ghost. He surprised himself whenever he saw his own reflection, like it was a trick of the light, a flashback, a hallucination. He didn't want to see it, didn't want to be reminded of who he was. The summer only made matters worse; the contrast of the sun trying hard to get through his closed curtains just made his room all the darker.

He knew what had been happening those few days in August - even if you were like Carl, you couldn't avoid it. The police had shot a man dead in Tottenham. The circumstances were suspicious, hazy. People wanted answers, but they didn't get any, didn't get anything. There'd been a protest. The protest had turned into a disturbance, the disturbance into a riot. And the riot had spread, was getting in people's heads, giving them ideas. It was blowing up.

From his window it looked like the whole estate was out on the streets. He could see smoke rising in the distance, helicopters. Trouble was closing in. Maybe it was looking for Carl. Maybe it was calling him back. It was. It did.

What happened was this . . .

Carl's reflection was obscured by the flames taking hold inside the car. He dropped the pole and walked a distance away in case the tank blew. He would've set light to it all if he could, send it all up, burn it all up, rip it all up and start again. Maybe next time they'd get it right. Wasn't this proof, wasn't it all proof that the world didn't work?

He looked at the helicopters again, hovering low: the police, the media. They created their own invisible ceiling, created a hothouse. And maybe that was it: maybe down on the streets they weren't meant to reach any higher. Maybe that had been Carl's mistake: trying. Maybe he had to stick with what he had, who he was, who he really was. Like he used to be. Street level. Street-level ambition, street-level hopes, street-level dreams. Street-level trouble.

What cause are you going to fight for when everything, when even just living, is a fight in itself?

Get up in the morning, win the battle. Walk straight, win the battle. They step out of your way? Good. You won the battle. That was as far as it got. There was no time for right and wrong. Right and wrong were luxuries, luxury items. Right was an expensive education and a fat wallet. Right was a bronze tan, a silver spoon, a golden handshake. And wrong was whatever right said it was, whatever right wanted it to be.

That day there was no right. Right was on holiday. The government was on holiday. It could afford one.

The riot police had cleared a path along the main road now, so Carl went the other way. He saw other groups of kids involved in pitched battles, smashing shops and cars and breaking windows, setting light to bins, or getting hold of whatever they could to take the fight back to the police.

Carl walked the streets. He was surprised how easy it was - first to take part, to cross lines he'd always thought were impossible to cross, then to walk around, be a tourist, watching, taking it in.

When he got back to the estate, battles were still going on with the police. There was a front line further up - it kept changing position as the police charged, retreated, charged, retreated. But for a large area behind, it could have been Carnival time. The streets were crowded, people laughing, drinking. The only difference was the burning smell wasn't grills and barbecues; it was cars and wheelie bins; and there was glass everywhere, crunching underfoot.

As the sun went down there was a lull. Most of the police had moved on, leaving the burning cars to smoulder on into the dusk. But there were still plenty of people who hadn't finished. Carl watched as a local mini-market was broken into. A crowd gathered outside, looking tentative at first, like captive animals who've had their cages opened. They weren't quick like they'd been on Mare Street. They didn't need to be. But once the first person went in and came out cradling bottles of spirits and packs of cigarettes, it didn't take long for others to follow, and soon there was a steady stream helping themselves.

There was a grab at Carl's shoulder. Carl turned and immediately recognized Bells from the narrow slit between bandana and hood. 'What are you doing here?' said Bells.

In that instant Carl knew the ground between them was flat, level. It was all level that day. He shrugged. 'The same thing everyone else is.'

'It's great, innit?' said Bells, softening, looking around with pride. 'Best day ever.'

'Yeah . . .'

Bells patted Carl's shoulder and disappeared into the mini-market.

The best day ever? Carl wasn't so sure. He watched the people walk in and out of the shop, all casual about it now, like it was normal. He saw Bells come out, meet someone he knew at the doorway and share a joke. Then Bells was gone, down the street, sauntering into the crowd, swigging on one of the bottles he'd taken.

Carl wasn't sure if he was there for the same reasons everyone else was, either. There'd been a bomb ticking. That afternoon it had

gone off. Carl had known the owners of the mini-market since he was a kid – he didn't remember them ever causing any trouble. They were his own people, part of the community, the same community. It was one thing getting angry, one thing blowing up; but it was another letting that bomb go off in your own face.

Carl didn't hang around for much longer, but the damage had been done. A couple of days later he saw Bells again in the car park outside his block.

'You want to be careful,' said Bells.

'Let it go, Bells. I'm finished with all that. Do what you want, man. I don't care any more.'

'I ain't talking about that. Look: I'm saying watch yourself. I saw you walking around. You should've covered yourself up. Those sentences are harsh, bruv. Two of my boys gone down already. No bail. Straight to court, straight inside. And straight inside for long. Watch yourself.'

Bells was right. It wasn't long before there was a heavy banging on Carl's front door.

He was taken to the police station and questioned – just a formality, going through the motions. He was put in a cell alone while he waited to be charged. He wasn't expecting anything else. He paced up and down; when he got bored of that he read the fire safety notice. He read the graffiti on the wall; back to the fire safety notice, managed to learn it off by heart. There wasn't much else to do. He lay down on the thin vinyl mattress and concentrated on his breathing. And he surprised himself: he started to laugh.

He'd tried to be good, but the world wasn't designed for people to be good: it was designed for them to be obedient – being on time, filling out forms, staying in line, keeping your head down. On the estate, off the estate, it worked out as the same thing. The crew and the police actually had a lot in common. They should get together, talk it over.

Carl thought back to that November night again. He thought about the whole time in between. He thought about going back to the community group. This time telling his story properly. All of it.

What good would it do if he didn't? The world needed to change, but no one ever changed anything by staying in line. Not the crew's line, not the police line, not the dotted line on all the world's forms. Carl had to draw his own line. That was the only line that mattered.

He pictured Stephen again, this time asking him about the riots, asking him about his sentence, what prison was like.

'Well,' said Carl quietly. 'What happened was this . . .'